

СВ. СЕМЕН ТУХАЛОВИЧ

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# The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

“Sic Semper Tyrannis”

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

## Booth's Own Story.

### He Wrote That He Cried "Sic Semper" Before Shooting Lincoln.

TO THE NEW YORK HERALD: In your paper I find a letter from Mr. Renton wherein he says he was informed by certain persons that John Wilkes Booth did not say "Sic semper tyrannis," or anything else, when he was in Ford's Theater, April 14, 1865, the night he shot Lincoln.

This assassin Booth was pursued by a portion of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry and captured at Garrett's barn in Virginia early in the morning of April 26, after he had been shot by Sergeant Boston Corbett. In Booth's pocket after he was dragged from the burning barn was found his diary. In this diary, which has been preserved in the archives of the Government, the assassin wrote these words:

"I walked with a firm step through a thousand of his friends; was stopped, but pushed on. A Colonel was at his side. I shouted 'Sic semper' before I fired. In jumping broke my leg. I passed all his pickets; rode thirty-six miles that night, the bone of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump."

Booth says himself he used the words that have always been attributed to him. The Washington papers on the morning of April 15, 1865, reported the words used by Booth as "Sic semper tyrannis."

I was in Washington on duty as a soldier and on the morning of April 15, 1865, visited the theater where the tragedy took place and the house where Lincoln died in the room on the ground or street floor hired from Mrs. Petersen by Sergeant Clark, Company D, Thirteenth Massachusetts Infantry. I made a record of these events in my own diary for 1865.

T. H. ROBERTS.

BROOKLYN, February 23. -22.

# NEW YORK HERALD

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1922.

## Lincoln's Assassination.

### Did John Wilkes Booth Cry "Sic Semper Tyrannis"?

TO THE NEW YORK HERALD: In Charles Burnham's fine article on "America's Greatest Tragedy," which you printed on Sunday, there is this passage: "For on the afternoon of the fateful 14th Mrs. Lincoln, who had a friendship for Laura Keane and received her at the White House, noticing a more than usual careworn look on the President's face, urged him to seek an hour's relaxation in watching the drollery of Sothorn's *Lord Dundreary*." This must be a mere slip, as Mr. Burnham would be the first to tell you that E. A. Sothorn was playing in England and that E. A. Emerson was the *Dundreary*.

While "Our American Cousin" was written by Tom Taylor for Josh Sillsbee, it was another comedian, Wayne Olwine, who produced it in Montreal long before Laura Keane staged it at her theater, 624 Broadway, New York, in 1858, when Sothorn and Joseph Jefferson played *Dundreary* and *Asa Trenchard*.

I have it straight from William J. Ferguson, who, with Laura Keane, was on the stage at the time, that the assassin did not say "Sic semper tyrannis" or anything else. He dashed past Ferguson and made for the stage door, where Jenny Gourlay was talking with the musical director, J. G. Withers, Jr. Brushing Miss Gourlay aside, he made a slash with a knife at Withers—only cutting his coat—jumped through the door and mounted a horse innocently held for him by a young stage hand.

HERBERT S. RENTON.

NEW ROCHELLE, February 15.

## WHERE DID BOOTH SHOUT?

### Some Say Assassin Spoke From Box, Others on the Stage.

From the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

Where precisely in Ford's theater was John Wilkes Booth when he uttered the famous words with which he announced his assassination of Lincoln? We had occasion to be definite about the point and turned naturally enough to Nicolay and Hay's great biography. There we read that the deranged actor shouted, "Sic semper tyrannis!" on the stage just before his escape after shooting the President.

To be certain, we decided to check this information with the report of William H. Herndon, Lincoln's one-time law partner, only to find that what he said was, "Sic semper tyrannis! The South is avenged," and that he cried it out from the box before he leaped to the stage. With this disagreement before us, we decided to canvass the representative biographies. Emil Ludwig, we found, has the Latin phrase shouted as Booth arose from the fall to the stage which snapped his ankle bone. Barton places him in the box when he speaks.

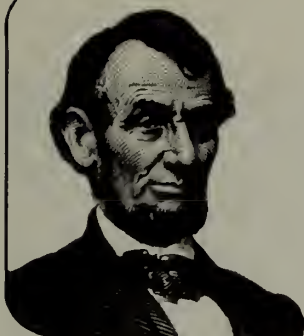
Ida M. Tarbell, James Morgan and the two English biographers—Lord Charnwood and D. W. Brogan—have the assassin speak on the stage. Ernest Sutherland Bates, who wrote the article on Booth for the Dictionary of American Biography, has him shouting in English as well as Latin as he leaped from the box. John B. Long's "Life Story" of Lincoln gives no quotation, and neither does the book of one Ferguson, entitled "I Saw Booth Shoot Lincoln." The Daily National Intelligencer of Washington for the day after the assassination, we found, describes it thus: "... A man rushed to the front of the President's box, waving a long dagger in his right hand and exclaiming, 'Sic semper tyrannis!' and immediately leaped from the box to the stage...."

And with that we closed our search. Here is one of the great tragic moments of American history with which is associated one of the most famous of utterances, and yet precisely what was said and where it was said must remain in doubt. What an elusive thing fact can be!

—An Irishman who attended Ford's Theatre on the night of the assassination, declared that Booth shouted, when he jumped from the stage box: "I'm sick! send for McMannis!" (*Sic semper Tyrannis*.)







# Lincoln Lore

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Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the  
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## JOHN HINCKLEY, JR., AND JOHN WILKES BOOTH

John Hinckley's attempt to assassinate President Ronald Reagan provoked the now customary ritual of national soul-searching and retelling of bad history. Reporters flocked to psychiatrists to get some insight on the madmen (and madwomen) who have at alarmingly frequent intervals attempted to sprinkle the pages of our history with the blood of American Presidents. In Hinckley's case the psychiatrists seem to have the most to tell us, but I long for the day when the reporters seek their historical perspective on current events from historians rather than medical doctors, political scientists, or other journalists.

The impulse to put such unsettling events in perspective is commendable, but the word "perspective" connotes the long

view. Only historians have a long enough view to assess the place of this most recent assassination attempt in America's political history. By failing to consult historians, the press falls for the version of history retailed by those who know little about it. Thus Jane E. Brody, in an article for the distinguished New York Times News Service, tells us that "Unlike other countries, where assassinations of heads of state are carried out either by political fanatics or in a military coup, in this country nearly all assassinations have been personally, not politically, motivated." Anthony Lewis, in an article in the New York Times of April 2nd, calls America's assassins and would-be assassins "lonely, demented men." "Of all the attacks," he writes, "only that on President



THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

AT FORD'S THEATRE WASHINGTON D.C. APRIL 14, 1865.

From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Lincoln's assassination as Currier & Ives depicted it.

Truman by Puerto Rican nationalists had an identifiable political purpose." *Time* magazine, in its April 13th issue, identified John Wilkes Booth as "the first of the modern American assassins." *Time* belittles his love for the Confederacy as "fustian" and stresses Booth's desire for fame. United Press International's Peter Costa got his history from a psychiatrist who had studied "Son of Sam" killer David Berkowitz and from other illustrious medicos. One of the latter said that "Recent assassination attempts have not been politically motivated." And the "Son of Sam" doctor added that John Wilkes Booth was similar to Hinckley in being a failure, overshadowed by a successful father. "The psychiatrist," Costa wrote, "said Boothe [sic] was a failed actor, who never received the critical acclaim that his father — also an actor — did." Most of the articles about the recent attempt agreed that only the Puerto Rican nationalists who attempted to kill President Harry Truman were exceptions to the rule that American assassins were mentally unstable loners little concerned with the issues of politics.

Absolutely nothing in the Lincoln assassination fits this new version of American history. In the hope of destroying this myth before it gains any serious degree of acceptance, let us review the facts of America's first Presidential assassination, John Wilkes Booth's political crime, the murder of Abraham Lincoln.

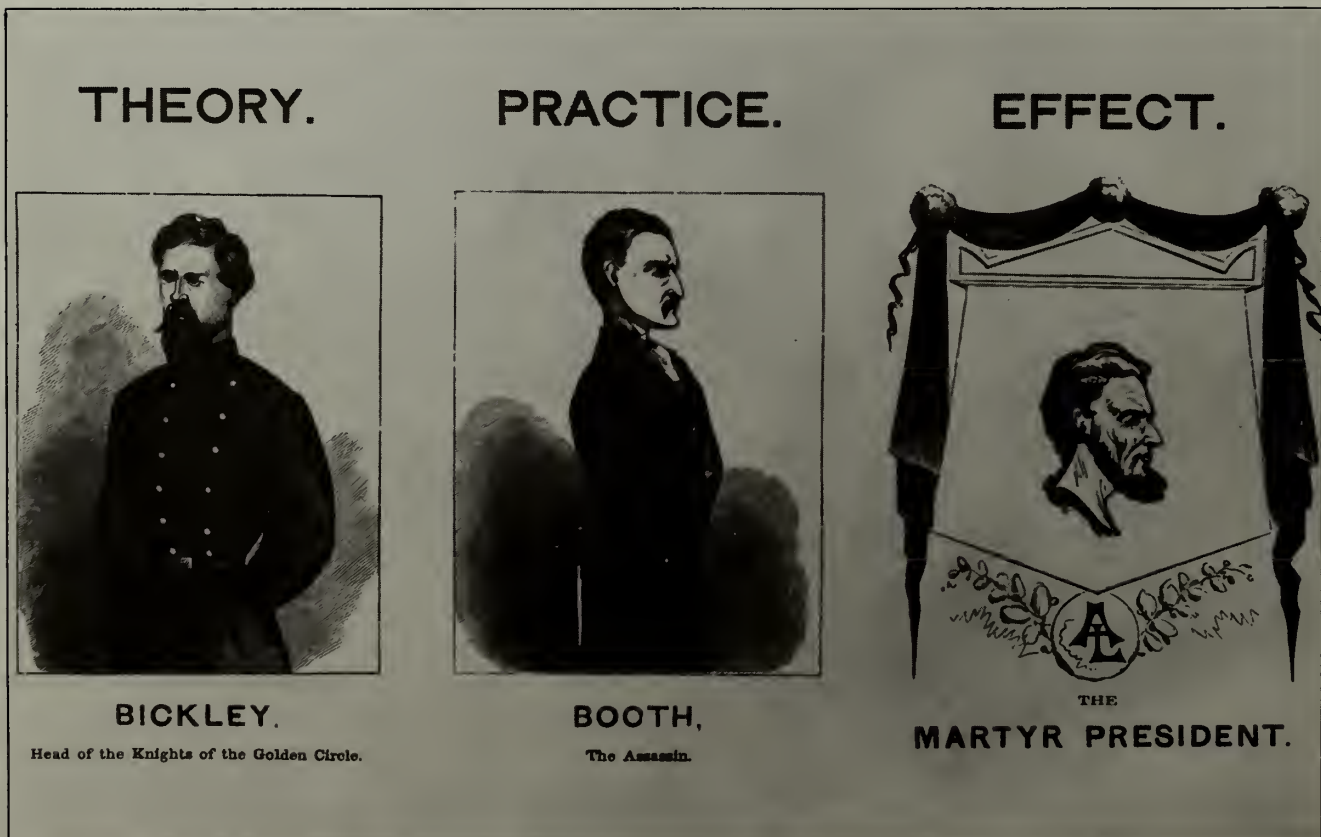
"They are quiet, slightly overweight young men more familiar with guns than with girls." This is the dramatic beginning of Peter Costa's article, which tries to force Booth into the mold of other assassins and would-be assassins. To this profile, Dr. Zigmond Lebensohn adds the portrait of "a single mentally disturbed person who is alienated from society, who feels like a zero, is wanted by no one and can't get a job." Jane Brody admits that Booth does not fit the mold of the "little people" who have since tried to kill American Presidents, but she hastens to add that "even Booth was the lesser light in a family of actors more successful than he."

It would be a great error to engage in a debate on this question on the narrow terms suggested by the journalists and psychologists. I do not relish the prospect of a debate over

Booth's psyche, about which we know very little. I feel certain that some doctors and journalists would not find Booth's \$20,000-a-year income a significant index of his secure fame as an actor. His reputation as a ladies' man might be thought a minor exception to the profile. More pertinent to setting the record straight is all the vast historical evidence the doctors and journalists fail to mention — the evidence that proves Lincoln's assassination was a crime with a clear political motive and not the weirdly inexplicable intrusion of a little lunatic into American history. The doctors and the reporters will not find the explanation of Lincoln's assassination by studying John Wilkes Booth's relationship with his father. The answer lies in the testimony, letters, and documents which Booth and his coconspirators left for historians to study.

Coconspirators? The doctors and journalists did not mention them, but they are an important proof of the nature of John Wilkes Booth's crime. In the first place, *they did exist*. His was not the work of some troubled individual so far from reality that he could enlist no one else in his cause. If fact, he enlisted quite a few. Booth's crime began as a plot to kidnap the President, and he gathered a large enough group to accomplish it — a group equipped with the talents he needed for a desperate act. In the late summer or early autumn of 1864, Booth contacted two old school chums of his, Samuel Bland Arnold and Michael O'Laughlen (or O'Laughlin). In the winter he added John Harrison Surratt, Jr. Surratt was well connected in the disloyal network of southern Maryland, and he probably introduced Booth to George A. Atzerodt, the next recruit. Booth added David Edgar Herold, a pharmacist's assistant who had sold the actor medicine when he was ailing from a growth on his neck, and, finally, Lewis Thornton Powell (alias Paine or Payne).

They were all useful men. Arnold and O'Laughlen were former soldiers. Surratt was a spy; he knew how to get away from Yankee soldiers and detectives. Herold was a partridge hunter, allegedly familiar with the backwoods of Maryland through which the kidnappers must flee. Atzerodt had often ferried spies across the river from Maryland to Virginia.



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. This rare and unidentified print interpreted Booth's crime as a political act.





*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

**FIGURE 3.** Ford's Theatre was a less inviting spot for crime.

Powell was a former soldier, too, and he was large, strong, and violent.

What held this group together? Political views. Arnold and O'Laughlen were former Confederate soldiers. Surratt was a Confederate spy who carried the illegal "mail" from Richmond to Canada and back. Atzerodt had helped Confederate spies also. Powell was an escaped Confederate prisoner of war. Only Herold was so triflingly boyish as to lack any defined political opinions. The other members of the group all hoped the Confederacy would win the war. All had directly aided the Confederate war effort. It is no wonder they did not like Lincoln.

Booth was a man of pronounced political opinions. He, too, hoped that the Confederacy would win the war, and his hope was so fervent that he gave up his successful acting career to pursue the political object of removing Lincoln as an obstacle to Confederate success. In the spring of 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant had ceased exchanging prisoners, figuring manpower was a more serious problem for the South than for the North. Booth thought he could regain that lost manpower for the South by exchanging the President for Confederate soldiers in Yankee prisons.

We know little about John Wilkes Booth, but we do know his political opinions. In November, 1864, he left a letter — the longest extant Booth letter — with his sister, Asia Booth Clarke. "People of the North," Booth warned, "to hate tyranny, to love liberty and justice, to strike at wrong and oppression, was the teaching of our fathers. The study of our early history will not let me forget it, and may it never." This libertarian rhetoric, the stock-in-trade of the Democratic opposition to the Lincoln administration, led Booth to fear that Lincoln was a tyrant. He told his brother Edwin, who voted for Lincoln in 1864, that Lincoln would become king of America. To his fears of the demise of liberty in America, John Wilkes Booth joined racial fears. He had grown up in Maryland, and the political philosophy of that slave state permeated Booth's mind. "This country was formed for the



*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

**FIGURE 4.** The Soldiers' Home offered the conspirators great opportunities to kidnap Lincoln.



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 5. John Wilkes Booth.

white, not for the black man," Booth's letter argued. "And, looking upon *African slavery* from the same standpoint held by the noble framers of our Constitution, I, for one, have ever considered it one of the greatest blessings (both for themselves and us) that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation. Witness heretofore our wealth and power; witness their elevation and enlightenment above their race elsewhere." Most accounts agree that when Booth shot Lincoln, he shouted, "*Sic semper tyrannis*." The political motive was uppermost in his mind from the beginning of the kidnap plot until that fateful moment over six months later at Ford's Theatre.

To be sure, Booth's was not a legitimate, rational, or ordinary political act. Thousands of Americans held the same political views he did without deciding to stalk the President with a Deringer pistol. Booth's coconspirators shrank in number as the crime became wilder in conception. By the time Booth had gathered enough men to kidnap the President, it was no longer the season of hot weather in Washington. Lincoln was no longer taking his long rides to the Soldiers' Home to sleep at night, and their opportunity was lost. Booth then decided to kidnap the President from Ford's Theatre while he watched a play. Arnold and O'Laughlen thought the new scheme preposterous; they would not have a shadow of a chance of coming out of it alive. After an abortive attempt to capture Lincoln in his carriage, they left the plot. John Surratt went back to carrying the Confederate mail to Canada. Booth now had too few men to kidnap the President.

Richmond fell. There was no place to take Lincoln now, even if the conspirators could capture him. Only truly desperate measures could save the Confederacy, keep American liberties safe from the "tyrant" in Washington, and make this an all-white country. By killing the President, the Vice-President, and the Secretary of State, Booth thought he might cause a revolution in the North that would accomplish his purposes. Atzerodt, Herold, and Powell were still with him, and each had a role to play on the night of April 14th.

It is true that the political motives for Booth's crime have been obscured over the years since 1865. Lincoln's fame has been an important factor in this. Most Americans have regarded Lincoln as so good a President that it seems only a

madman could have killed him. Moreover, it took an enormous effort to bring this country back together after the bloodiest war in its history. It would not have aided this effort to be constantly reminded that men of Confederate sympathies were responsible for Lincoln's murder. The political motives were conveniently ignored for the sake of national unity; many eventually forgot them. Concern for the Negro reached an acme during the Civil War and Reconstruction. After 1877 white opinions of the Negro declined precipitously, and by the turn of the century few white Americans cared enough about the plight of the black man to recall that hatred of the Emancipation Proclamation motivated Lincoln's assassins.

Finally, Lincoln scholarship itself has been somewhat to blame for our tendency to forget Booth's political motives. The great Lincoln biographers, like James G. Randall, often boasted that they were concerned in their works only with the living Lincoln. They left the assassination to amateurs and sensationalists who invented new motives for Booth's act, motives that further obscured the true political motive for the crime.

The fact remains that Lincoln's assassination was the act of political fanatics, not of a solitary lunatic trying to work out his personal psychological problems. Historians would have told the reporters, if only they had been asked. There is no simple solution to the problem of assassination in America, but the problem will never be solved if we ignore what history tells us about these crimes.

#### IN MEMORIAM EVERETTE BEACH LONG (1919-1981)

E.B. "Pete" Long, a member of *Lincoln Lore's* Bibliography Committee, died in Chicago on March 31.

Born in Whitehall, Wisconsin, Mr. Long attended Miami University (Ohio) and Northwestern University. His distinguished career began in journalism. He worked for the Associated Press for eight years and became an editor of the *American Peoples Encyclopedia*. In the 1950s he became Bruce Catton's research assistant on the three-volume *Centennial History of the Civil War*. That experience led to similar work for Allan Nevins on the later volumes of his monumental *Ordeal of the Union* series.

In 1969 Mr. Long left Chicago, where he had lived most of his mature life, for Wyoming. He carried with him an enormous store of knowledge about the Civil War. Two years later he published *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865*. This remarkable reference work — 728 pages of facts — sits at the elbow of nearly all Civil War historians. Long became a Professor of American Studies at the University of Wyoming, one of the very few people in the country to attain such academic status without a Ph.D.

Professor Long recently completed *The Saints and the Union: Utah Territory during the Civil War*, a study of the troubled relationship between the Mormons and the United States in its most critical period. He returned to Chicago this spring to speak about his new book to a local club. He was among old friends. "Pete" was perhaps the most sought-after speaker for Civil War Round Tables, and the Milwaukee and Fort Wayne clubs were awaiting his visit. After the Chicago speech, he walked to his hotel, called his beloved wife of thirty-nine years, described his fine day to her, hung up, and died moments later of a heart attack.

"Pete" was friendly and conscientious. He was a stimulating conversationalist and a dedicated worker. He was a prolific and good writer. He was a gifted, even inspiring, speaker. He truly "gave the last full measure of devotion" to the study of the Civil War.





